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Date: December 4, 2012

To: Representative Foster, Chairperson
House Natural Resources Committee Members

From: Rebecca Park, Governmental Affairs

Re: Testimony on SB 1057-1062 and 1287

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment in support of SB 1057-1062 and 1287, which create part of the Nonindustrial Private Forestland program changes. HB 4969, 4970 and 4302 complete the package and are currently in the Senate Natural Resources committee and up for action this week. I appreciate the leadership from all the sponsors and their dedication as this package has been in process for nearly two years.

The package of bills takes a new look at the benefits and value of land in Michigan. The basic premise behind the bills is that an educated landowner is more likely to conduct active management on the land they own. Many landowners today aren't sure where to start when looking at "what could be" on their property. There also seems to be a lack of understanding that land can have more than one use. The parcel up north, for example, can work equally well for snowmobiling or hunting opportunities, as well as timber management and, in fact, many times managing the timber will enhance those other opportunities.

The package looks at the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP) as the process model. MAEAP has existed for a number of years, but just last year was codified into law under a 91/18 vote in the House. Through MAEAP, conservation district technicians are utilized to visit farms and conduct a risk assessment. The package before you today would expand the assessment of the technicians to also include value or other benefits to the land. This program is meant for all land, not just farms.

By tying tax incentives to the land, so long as future owners of the land continue in the program, they will be exempted from the pop-up tax or when the assessed value and taxable value equalize. This move will help keep the land under family ownership and avoid further splitting of parcels in Michigan. Most would agree that larger blocks of land under common ownership are easier to manage and have a tendency to be more productive than several 5 or 10 acre parcels with different owners.

Finally, the bills allow for the combination of two programs, the new Qualified Forest Program and the current Qualified Agriculture Program. Combining the two programs makes it more advantageous for agriculture landowners who may not have 50% of the parcel in agriculture, due to topography, to manage their woodlot in conjunction with the agriculture portions of their land.

Farm Bureau policy has multiple places where it asks for forestry to be treated as a component of agriculture. Therefore, Farm Bureau urges support of SB 1057-1062 and 1287. Thank you for your consideration.